From the Proceedings of the Meeting of the American Antiquarian Society, in Boston, April 29, 1874.—*Report of the Librarian.*

Your librarian has had frequent occasion, and more frequent *inclination*, to refer to the Mather manuscripts in our possession, as affording valuable material for publication. The clergymen of that family, for three generations, held such positions in connection with the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of New England as to give them a representative character in its history. Hence their writings and acts, whether of a public or of a private and personal nature, have been peculiarly subjects of notice and criticism. The naturally strong qualities of mind and high culture implied by their contemporary prominence and influence, among men themselves able and well educated, have contrasted so strongly with certain apparent weaknesses, and seemingly unamiable and undignified traits, disclosed by their diaries, and other private papers, (and thence reflected upon printed productions, themselves not always remarkable for judgment and good taste), as to afford opportunities for unfavorable comment not easy to be resisted. The tide of modern opinion has set so generally against Increase and Cotton Mather that people who read history and observe how much they were respected in their own time, notwithstanding the full proportion of enmities and jealousies attending the public consideration they commanded, begin to inquire if their faults may not possibly now be even more exaggerated than

were their merits when these were seen and measured by the eyes of contemporaries and daily associates.

The prejudice against the Mathers, fostered by the severity of their condemnation at the hands of some eminent writers, has operated with unhappy force and effect upon one portion of our New England history. *The story of witchcraft delusions* here has derived pungency and unfavorable notoriety, to a large extent, from the connection of the Mathers with it, and their supposed responsibility for it. Thus the occurrences, sad and disreputable enough as they were—in our enlightened estimation—have been made to bear the additional burden of the personal unpopularity of two men. The blame of the proceedings has been cast upon them, and the reputation of New England has suffered, to the extent of making her a *byword*, for yielding, as alleged, to the influence of their weak superstition and love of control.

There are not many persons of mental condition so evenly balanced and carefully trained that a diary of their secret sentiments and emotions, faithfully kept, with entire freedom from restraint, would not, if made public, detract somewhat from the dignity of their reputation. The diaries of what may be termed *the Puritan Era*, so largely consisted of self-examinations in the supposed presence of an All-seeing Eye, that they in a manner took the place of the confessionals of the Romish church; resembling the system of that church also in the practise of estimating merits, or spontaneous acts and impulses of a virtuous character, as well as causes of abasement, as a means of determining the existing moral condition. An American statesman and orator of the last generation, was much impressed with the impolicy of leaving the private papers of a person of his temperament to the

construction of posterity, and consigned letters and other manuscripts to the flames so effectually that his autograph is a rarity even among his children. It would have been well for the fame of the *Mathers* if they had made a similar sacrifice. The quasi confessions, upon which they are often judged and condemned, are of a kind that would hardly be received as legitimate evidence of guiltiness in a judicial trial, and are to be taken not so much in a literal as in a theological sense.

With their prodigal use of the pen, and their habit of preserving the minutest and most common-place memoranda, they were also, fortunately, collectors of some classes of manuscripts other than their own, such as might naturally fall into their hands as the leading theologians of their time. Their possession of papers prepared for the Synods of 1648, 1662, and 1680, by eminent ministers, is significant of their leadership in moulding and directing the results of those great Councils.

At the Synod of 1648, *John Cotton*, *Richard Mather*, and *Ralph Partridge*, were selected from among the clergymen, each of them to draw up "*a scriptural model of church government, unto the end that out of those there might be one educed*" which the Synod would adopt. It happened that the model prepared by Richard Mather was the one most largely used in the framing of the platform. Among the family papers we have, in Richard Mather's handwriting, the copy from which the platform as adopted was printed, and also his original draft or model. Believing that a comparison of these papers would throw some additional light upon the ecclesiastical history of New England, by revealing what had been rejected as well as what had

been accepted in this process of determining and defining the rules of faith and practice, an arrangement was planned, a year or two since, for publishing these documents with suitable annotations. It fell through in consequence of a disappointment in regard to the expected editorship. As matters have turned out, however, the delay is not to be regretted; for the model drawn up by Rev. Mr. Partridge has now been discovered in the same collection. It appeared as an obscurely written treatise "*On Church Government*," which had been ascribed by the late Rev. Dr. Felt to Mr. Reyner, and bore his endorsement to that effect.

At the October meeting of the Society this was shown to Rev. Dr. Henry M. Dexter, who suggested that it might possibly be the lost model of a platform prepared by the third member of the Commission, Mr. Partridge. The truth of this happy conjecture was tested and verified by means of a passage in Increase Mather's work, entitled "First Principles of New England," &c., published in 1675, where an extract from Mr. Partridge's model is given, with a statement that "the manuscript is still extant in the handwriting of the Reverend author." The passage quoted was found in the manuscript, and the opinion of Dr. Dexter proved to be correct. It has required both care and study on the part of Mr. Barton, the assistant librarian, to secure an accurate copy of the document; but it proves to be an important paper of its kind, bearing in some of its points upon questions recently agitated in prominent Congregational churches. It only remains for Dr. Dexter to follow the bent of his studies and tastes, his prelections and his predilections, and confer upon the Society the favor of being

able, through his agency, to publish these records of religious history with suitable explanations.

An opportunity of illustrating the medical opinions and practices prevalent in the time of the Mathers is afforded to the profession by Cotton Mather's elaborate and curious manuscript treatise, bearing the quaint title of "The Angel of Bethesda;" filled with remedies, moral, mental, and in a double sense physical, such as were supposed at that day, by leading authorities, to be effective.

This should not be confounded with a brief tract printed by him, with the same title, but without his name, having on the title page only the signature "By a Fellow of the Royal Society." There is an evident connection between the two, but the manuscript work is very much more full and extensive. The Angel of Bethesda has the running title of "NISHMATH CHAJIM," or, "Breath of Life." It begins with the statement that "There is *a Spirit in Man:* a Wonderful Spirit, which from very good authority may be called NISHMATH CHAJIM *(or the Breath of Life:)* and which may be of a *Middle Nature* between the *Rational Soul* and the Corporeal Mass; but may be the *Medium of Communication* by which they work upon one another. It wonderfully receives also *Impressions* from *Both* of them, and perhaps it is the Vital Tye between them."

In a letter received lately from a gentleman whose ancestors were connected closely with the Salem witchcraft proceedings, and who is preparing to print a new and exhaustive account of those events from the vantage ground of modern Spiritualism, the writer states that Cotton Mather, "when he could manage cases of witchcraft alone, and privately, was disposed to do it patiently, kindly, wisely

even, as looked at from his stand-point. He had obtained glimpses of mesmeric force, and began to learn that by movements of his hands and arms he could vary their action. For this he was ridiculed by Calef. The difficulty with him—but of which he was all unconscious—was that he ascribed the aid he received to the Almighty directly, and perhaps presumed that it came because of his holiness, while he in fact derived it from chance compliance with the laws which govern the natural forces called *mesmeric*, or animal magnetism. When he worked alone he was the best manager of witchcraft cases of his day."

This statement is from a letter of inquiry respecting our proposed publication of Cotton Mather's manuscript account of the case of Mercy Short, a case similar to that of Margaret Rule but of greater interest and fuller details. It will be remembered that the account of Margaret Rule was not published by Mather himself, but by his enemy Calef, who, by some means, obtained possession of it. The story of Mercy Short, from an endorsement upon it, appears to have been privately circulated among friends, but there is nothing to show that Mather intended it for publication.

Whether modern phases of supernaturalism afford explanation and palliation of its ancient forms, or fail to do so, we need not stop to consider, in order to feel sure that great injustice has been done to New England by the manner in which the incidents of her connection with witchcraft have been narrated. It is not necessary to re-examine the incidents themselves, or to refer to points of controversy respecting agencies and influences; these have been more than sufficiently investigated and discussed. We may go behind all that has been printed, and say there is good

reason for assuming that the accounts of the witchcraft proceedings have been written from a wrong point of view, and have been colored and shaded in a way to cause erroneous impressions of their relative character and the responsibility of the country for them. A mere episode in the history of a delusion common to all communities of all periods, and that has been wildest and most destructive where civilization was most advanced, happening to break out here under remarkably favorable conditions for its appearance, has been treated as if it were chargeable to local fanaticism, and indicative of local and special bigotry and superstition. The idea has been generated that belief in witchcraft was a *New England variety of the Puritan Faith, and that Cotton Mather was its Prophet!*

It is nevertheless true, and it will ultimately be admitted, that New England, as contrasted with other countries—in every particular with the mother country—is entitled to credit for her comparatively sensible, christian, liberal and decisive mode of dealing with incomprehensible phenomena, according to law and gospel as then understood by the wisest and strongest minds. Her practical and speedy disposal of the subject, with comparatively little private suffering or public disturbance, shows to real advantage by the side of the greater outrages which long after continued to occur in England and Scotland, and should have saved her from the exceptional obloquy to which she has undeservedly been subjected.

If the story should be told, not as an abnormal, but only as an *additional* illustration of human infirmity, made conspicuous by the isolation of its locality (as an object of microscopic examination is isolated for distinctness of view)

and because of a concentration of public attention upon the time and the men and the circumstances for other and independent reasons, the method of representation would be fairer and more philosophical. Whether the proceedings are regarded from a metaphysical point of consideration, or in their relation to religious obligations and legal requirements, nothing new or original in conception, and nothing unusual or excessive in conduct, can be charged upon our fathers. The distinguishing features of their operations are an uncompromising submission to their views of religious duty, and a literal obedience to laws which directed with great precision the modes of procedure in such cases. The physical and metaphysical phenomena were exactly such as they were led to expect by the precedents of other lands and other times. The tests, the manner of examination, the nature of the evidence, the process of trial, and the consequences of conviction, were laid down, with a clearness that admitted of no evasion or misinterpretation, in "Dalton's Justice," the accepted legal guide of the provinces. In three editions of this standard law-book of the *Old* England and almost solitary one of the *New*, now before me, (those of 1622, 1625, and 1680), the common forms of supposed witchcraft are classed among the felonies by statute without benefit of clergy. They are described with particularity, with some slight enlargement in the later edition; as by the remark that "by the ancient common law such offenders were to be *burned*," and by reference to "the law of God against witches, and the seekers of witches and wizards." For the "better discovery" of witches and witchcrafts (meaning the investigation of alleged cases) the author has inserted rules and observations "partly out of the Book of

Discovery of the Witches that were arraigned at Lancaster, England, anno 1612, before Sir James Altham, and Sir Edward Bromley, Judges of Assize, and partly out of Mr. Bernard's "Guide to Grand Jurymen." No one can read these directions and legal precedents, occupying more than two closely printed folio pages, without being struck with the scrupulous exactness of their observance in the trials at Salem. The proper constitution of the Court, the technical definition of the crime, the character of the evidence to be sought and admitted, and the penalty to be inflicted, being prescribed minutely and strictly, little freedom of action was left to the judges. If they did nothing extenuate, and nothing set down in malice, they filled the measure of their responsibility.

The real responsibility of these tragical trials may be carried back to the statute of 33 Henry VIII., and to the sermon preached by Bishop Jewell before the Queen, in 1558, in which he alarmed her majesty by suggesting that the witches and sorcerers, which had marvellously increased of late years, and were sadly afflicting her subjects, might extend their baleful influences to her sacred self. In the next parliament a bill was passed making enchantments and witchcrafts felony; and upon this foundation the English law relating to those declared crimes was built up and established by repeated trials, by another statute in the reign of James I., and by the ruling of the most distinguished judges, till it acquired the explicit form and directory character set forth in the edition of Dalton printed just before the crisis in New England of 1692.

Sir John Popham, whose only exhibition of visionary tendencies was when he attempted to utilize convicts by

planting a colony of them in Maine, and concerning whose operations our historical brethren of that State have been a little *bewitched*, had an opportunity to construe the statute in 1589. One Mrs. Dyer, (perhaps an ancestress of the Mary Dyer who was so troublesome in Boston), had practiced conjuration against the Queen. Secretary Walsingham submitted the case to Popham, then Queen's attorney, for his opinion of the proper measures to be taken. That hard-headed lawyer, not very prone, we may believe, to be affected by superstitious fancies, decided that Mrs. Dyer's conjurations were not within the compass of the Act, because she neither set figures nor made pictures, which were supposed to be requisite to the effectiveness of the spell.

Since legislation, explained and confirmed by judicial decisions of the highest authority, extending through several generations, had clearly settled the English law and practice concerning witchcraft, as an acknowledged fact and felonious crime, how could our New England judges avoid condemning the alleged culprits if they believed them guilty? And why should they not believe them guilty, when the evidence produced, the confessions, the incidents constituting the disgusting phenomena of the offense, conformed precisely to the signs, symptoms, confessions, &c., detailed in the English precedents they were constrained to follow?

And why should they not believe in witchcraft as an abstract question? The Bible, regarded by them, in its literal sense, as the foundation of all law, declares explicitly, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Hence Martin Luther says, in his "Table Talk," "I should have no compassion on these witches. I should burn them all."

So thought Calvin's enlightened city of Geneva, where five hundred were burned in three months. The existence and power of witches had been recognized, not by puritans especially, but by divines, judges, philosophers, of the highest rank and admitted wisdom, in continued succession.* Barrington estimates the judicial murders for witchcraft in England at an average of one hundred and fifty per annum for two hundred years, or thirty thousand in all. There were executions for this cause in England as late as 1716, and in Scotland as late as 1722. The laws against witchcraft remained on the statute book till 9th of George II., when they were repealed.

If, in this remote corner of the world, our ancestors had been somewhat behind their age in clinging to long established convictions, it would be no ground for wonder or blame. It would rather be a circumstance requiring explanation if the influences by which they were surrounded had not nourished, or even developed superstition in the coolest and steadiest minds. The cause which brought them into this wilderness was one against which they firmly believed evil spirits were strenuously contending. Here they struggled for existence beneath the shadow of mystical forests, that were haunted by treacherous savages, practising weird and elfish rites, hovering about their infant settlements, and subjecting them to sudden and cruel destruction in the darkness of the night. The succeeding generations grew up

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* "It is, I think, difficult to examine the subject with impartiality, without coming to the conclusion that the historical evidence establishing the reality of witchcraft is so vast and so varied that it is impossible to disbelieve it, without what, on other subjects, we should deem the most extraordinary rashness." — *Hist. of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe. By W. E. Lecky. I.*, 38.

with their imaginations alert and their senses quickened to the sights and sounds of nature, and whatever was threatening or mysterious. They had experienced great disappointments and great calamities. With the failure of political hopes and religious aspirations came exhaustion from the costly and bloody conflicts which wasted their means and took from them the choicest of their offspring.

When things go wrong, and the times are out of joint, and the reasons are not apparent, or seem to be inadequate, human nature inevitably yields to an impression of the presence of subtle and supernatural agencies, thwarting the wisest plans and frustrating the most reasonable expectations.

It is not for us, in these days of table tippings, of magic circles, and ghostly communications, connected with scenes and actions nearly as absurd and puerile, if not as gross, as those of the supposed cases of demoniacal possession, to pronounce such appearances to be wholly imaginary, or wholly the result of deliberate deceit; unless we are also prepared to condemn our friends and neighbors who firmly believe in the honesty of such preternatural claims, and only do not happen to live in a time when they are regarded as unholy and dangerous, and are punishable by law.

With all that science now teaches of the infinitely varied and inexplicable and uncontrollable character of what are called nervous affections,* it is as unphilosophical to ascribe the singular behavior of children and others, who in 1692 were thought to be bewitched, to ingenious fraud, as it is unreasonable to accuse the clergy of that excited period

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* See "Une Relation sur une Epidemie d'Hystero-Demonopathie en 1861, par le Docteur A. Constans. Paris, 1863."

with fomenting the alarms and agitations with a view to the increase of their own personal influence. Human conduct is always liable to the suspicion of mixed motives; but the charge in this case is too monstrous to be credible. It is no more than just to afford to Cotton Mather the benefit of facts which are necessary to a correct understanding of his position at the period of the witchcraft trials. He was then but twenty-nine years old, the junior of nearly all his associates in the ministry. His habits of severe study, with the vigils and fasts then deemed necessary adjuncts of piety, had broken down his health, and produced a dyspeptical and morbid condition of mind and body, constantly manifested in his diary of 1692, *the memorable year*. "My health," he says, "has been lamentably broken down for divers years, partly by my excessive toils in the public and private exercise of my calling, but chiefly, I fear, by my sins against the God of my health." Again he says that "illness and an aguish indisposition" grew upon him at such a rate that he "lives in exceeding misery, and can see nothing but a speedy death approaching."

His physical condition should be taken into account, with the fact that he had been from childhood almost wholly and merely a student, whose knowledge of men and things was derived from books rather than from intercourse and observation. He was the scholar of his time, and felt that the responsibility of that position was to be sustained. Moreover, there was a family consideration and influence which, coming to him in the third generation, imposed upon him an additional burden of expectations to be answered. So that he was bound to be better informed on all subjects than anybody else, and also to take an active and influential part

in whatever was going forward. It was in his awkward efforts to combine these duties and obligations, without natural tact, and with little knowledge of the world, that he became so largely and unfortunately mixed with the proceedings against witches. It is not unlikely that a candid re-consideration of those events, in all their relations, will remove some prejudices affecting his reputation for sincerity, and fidelity to his convictions; while it should relieve the good name of New England from every unjust opprobrium, and place the discredit where it properly belongs.

Respectfully submitted,

S. F. HAVEN.